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Edited by
Asad R. Rahmani, Director, BNHS

Editorial Board
J. C. Daniel, Hon. Secretary, BNHS

Compiled, Layout and Designed by
Gopi Naidu, Abhijit Malekar,
Noor Khan and Vidyadhar Atkore

Contributions should be sent to
Editors, MISTNET, IBA-IBCN
Bombay Natural History Society
Hornbill House, S. B. Singh Road
Mumbai-400 001, INDIA
Tel: +91 22 22821811
Fax: +91 22 22837615
Email: ibabnhs@gmail.com



Bombay Natural History Society

Mission Statement

'Conservation of nature, primarily biological diversity through action, based on research, education and public awareness.'

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BirdLife International is a global partnership of conservation organisations, represented in over 100 countries, working for the diversity of all life through the conservation of birds and their habitats.

BirdLife International
Wellbrook Court, Girton Road
Cambridge CB3 0NA, UK
Email: birdlife@birdlife.org.uk
Web: www.birdlife.org



www.rspb.org.uk

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Cover:

Sociable Lapwing *Vanellus gregarius*
by Clement Francis M

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Spreading Knowledge for better conservation

One of the aims of the Bombay Natural History Society and Indian Bird Conservation Network is to spread knowledge, information and data to our members and the civil society to take better conservation measures. As it has rightly been said, “Knowledge is power”. Without knowledge on a subject or a species or a site, can we take appropriate conservation measures? Wisdom comes with knowledge and experience. However there is a flip side to this. “Little knowledge is a dangerous thing.” I see this very often during my visits to IBAs and PAs. Totally inappropriate measures are taken by the protected area managers based on whimsical reasons. Sometimes the main consideration is to utilize the funds before the end of a financial year and not the requirement of an IBA. That is why we have cases like 16 waterholes in a 6 sq km Rollopadu Bustard Sanctuary, extremely ugly watchtowers in Sheikhha Jheel or extensive plantation in a wetland, thus destroying its original character. These things will go on as long as we have PA managers with no or little understanding of ecology and a conceited attitude that ‘I know everything’. Yes, possibly he knows how to utilize funds, but he may not have any knowledge of basic ecological and social requirements of an IBA/PA.

The *Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society (JBNHS)*, which is now running in its 105 volume is a storehouse of knowledge and ecological wisdom. Articles in earlier issues mainly dealt with *shikar*, fishing, and description of new species. They were long, descriptive and anecdotal, and for me personally, good to read. Later, by early 1970s, the *Journal* became more ‘scientific’, so the character of the *Journal* changed. We started publishing papers full of statistics, tables and graphs. Nevertheless, such papers are also important to understand ecology and biodiversity of India. Fortunately, the ‘Short Notes’ have not changed much, and still a delight to read. Short Notes are contributed by the BNHS members with various academic backgrounds, amateur naturalists, students and scientists. This is what we call ‘citizen science’ where anyone can contribute - you do not need a scientific degree. Short Notes mostly deal with short-term but interesting observations, new distribution records, description of a new species (mostly plants) and brief data of any wildlife subject. Contribution of *JBNHS* Short Notes in understanding the biodiversity of the Indian subcontinent is immense.

As publishing a journal is very expensive, the *JBNHS* goes to only subscribers. The old issues are not easily available, except in good libraries. In order to make *JBNHS* easily accessible, BNHS has brought out a DVD with 100 volumes. The cost is only Rs.1,000/-. Imagine having 100 volumes of *JBNHS* in your computer! Please read more about this wonderful DVD on page 20. I request all IBCN partners to purchase a DVD. As a mark of respect to the BNHS and IBCN, please do not make copies. Thanks.

In order to spread knowledge on conservation, the Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of India has established Environmental Information System (ENVIS). At present there are 85 centres on various subjects and focal areas. The BNHS ENVIS Centre deals with Avian Ecology. Please read article by Sujit Narwade, Scientist-in-Charge of BNHS ENVIS Centre on page 10-11. We publish a newsletter *Buceros*, which goes to nearly 700 institutes and individuals. You can download all the issues of *Buceros* from our website. I request IBCN state coordinators and partners to extensively make use of ENVIS centres (please visit www.bnhsenvvis.nic.in).

Everything materialistic depletes when we share it – money, food, natural resources, and space. Knowledge, affection and love are the only things which increase when we share them. A good example of sharing of knowledge is our book *Ducks, Geese and Swans of India*. This book would not have been possible without data sharing by many IBCN and BNHS members. Many of them provided unpublished data from their field notes. I thank all the major contributors. Most photographers provided free pictures. However, some ornithologists, even IBCN partners, refused to share any data, but that is fine with me. Variety is the spice of life! Life would have been a bit boring if everyone was similar. With or without your data, the book has come out well. Please read about this book on page 16.

Asad R. Rahmani



Introduction :

We undertook a three day (9th – 11th June 2006) survey in Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra in an attempt to rediscover the critically endangered Jerdon's Courser *Rhinoptilus bitorquatus*. The area is the only erstwhile known habitat in Maharashtra.

Jerdon's Courser is a small cursorial bird that inhabits open patches in scrub jungle. It is endemic to southern India, principally known from southern Andhra Pradesh. It has an extremely limited geographical range, being known from the Godavari river valley near Sironcha and Bhadrachalam and from the Cuddapah and Anantpur areas in the valley of the Pennar River (Ali and Ripley, 1987 Birdlife International, 2001). It is mostly active at dusk and during the night. It was first recorded in the mid 19th century; it was then considered to be extinct for more than 80 years, until it was rediscovered in 1986 at Cuddapah District, Andhra Pradesh (Bhushan 1986). In Maharashtra it was reported from "24 km east of Sironcha, near the Godavari river, three birds, undated (Blanford 1867, 1869), and sometime in the 20-year period before 1935 (D'Abreu, 1935)".

Planning:

We planned the itinerary well in advance and took certain precautions in view of the Naxal activity in the study area. This included: not to dress in camouflage (greens, khakis, commando type), not to pose as government officials (we are not!), not to use government vehicles, not to discuss anything about Naxalites and have locals with us all the time. We got the call recording of the Jerdon's Courser from Mr. P. Jeganathan of B.N.H.S. working at Sri Lankamaleswara Wildlife Sanctuary, Cuddapah, Andhra Pradesh. The call box is in the form of a small box that plays the call ten times. The call can be rendered as "kwik-koo...kwik-koo" (Jeganathan, 2005a,b, & c). We had the call enhanced

Status survey of Jerdon's Courser *Rhinoptilus bitorquatus* in Vidarbha, Maharashtra

Raju Kasambe#, Dr. Anil Pimplapure* & Gopal Thosar**



Pic: P. Jeganathan

The Critically Endangered Jerdon's Courser

in a professional studio to play 100 times consecutively. We prepared a colour photo folder with pictures of the Jerdon's Courser, Red-wattled Lapwing *Vanellus indicus* and Yellow-wattled Lapwing *Vanellus malabaricus* side-by-side. We carried a powerful searchlight with us besides binoculars, spotting scope, cameras and video camera equipment. Whenever we used the searchlight, there was every possibility of Naxalites mistaking us for police on combing operations or police thinking us to be a brigade of Naxalites on the move in the forest. Either way we could have got killed and every time we used the searchlight, fear gripped us!

Day-1 (9th June 2006)

Gadchiroli district is the easternmost tip of Maharashtra. The river Pranahita

forms the southern boundary and the river Indravati forms the eastern boundary of the district. On the first day, we travelled along this route to reach our first major stop, Sironcha.

When we crossed Vainganga River before Armori town, we saw nearly 60 Asian Openbills *Anastomus oscitans* in the river basin. At Konesari, there is a small patch of beautiful forest. Here we saw (the state animal of Maharashtra) the Giant Squirrels and their nests. Mr. Medpalliwar, the RFO was a knowledgeable person and informed us that the Giant Squirrel nests had increased from 64 to 74.

In this small jewel, we also saw Mottled Wood Owl *Strix ocellata*, Common Hawk Cuckoo *Hierococcyx varius*, Asian Paradise Flycatcher *Terpsiphone paradisi*, Rufous Treepie

Dendrocitta vagabunda, Crested Treeswift *Hemiprogne coronata*, Black-rumped Flameback *Dinopium benghalense* and Oriental White-eye *Zosterops palpebrosus*. After Alapalli, the landscape resembles that of Andhra Pradesh. The main crop is paddy, many speak Telugu, and the forest looks like that of the Eastern Ghats.

We reached Sironcha in the late afternoon. Here Mr. Shaikh, the RFO, arranged for our stay. We called some knowledgeable locals, Sinu, Shafi and Shankar Gauraa Dongri. From the photos and call replays from the call box, we got 'positive' information as they appeared to identify the Jerdon's Courser. Raju showed illustrations from *Birds of the Indian subcontinent* (Grimmet *et al.* 2000) to the locals and asked for the names in the local Telugu language. From this discussion we understood that in Telugu language the Red-wattled Lapwing is known as "Kandleedi Pittya" and "Sitwa", and the Indian Courser is known as "Kaalutellaga Untai" and "Pedda Sitwa". But except "Kandleedi Pittya" the remaining three names might be wrong as the locals often got confused with the names and pictures. Also, we got three names for Jerdon's Courser viz., *Kaamjulu*, *Gabilam* and *Akhdobera* (at Kopela) (Note that in Telugu - Grey Francolin is called *Kaamjulu*, Fruit Bat is called *Gabilam*). But nobody could understand the meaning of "Adava-wuttu-titti", the Telugu name given to the Jerdon's Courser in the "Fauna of British India".

We used the call-replay method mostly during the dark playing the call many times in the evening (7 pm to 9 pm) in open scrub jungle near Sironcha and waiting for any response. Once Mr. Thosar and Ashish Bhole felt they had heard the response of the Jerdon's Courser; however others did not hear it. We clearly heard calls of Spotted Owlet *Athene brama*, Red-wattled Lapwing, Yellow-wattled Lapwing, Brainfever Bird, and four species of nightjars.

Day-2 (10th June 2006):

We got up at 4 am and at 5 am we started the call replays in the open scrub jungles of Nandigaon, near Sironcha. Here, because of encroachments, the open scrub jungle patches are getting converted to agriculture. We proceeded towards Marigudam and Tigalgudam. Here the forest is dense and hence the habitat did not look promising. While coming back we replayed the calls near Rajiv Nagar and Arda villages but to no success. In this session we saw two families of Small Green Bee-eaters *Merops orientalis*, Yellow-wattled Lapwings, Black Ibis *Pseudibis*

headed Babbler *Turdoides affinis* was a treat to see and listen to. The sweet long calls confused us as it is different from the calls of other babbler species.

On the road to Asaralli (approximately 15 kilometers east of Sironcha) near a Christian cemetery, a Neem tree had around 40 nests of Baya Weavers. Here the habitat was open scrub jungle and the two species of lapwings were seen all around.

In the afternoon we moved to Asaralli range, east of Sironcha. We had no option but to travel by the forest department's jeep, as there was no fuel available for our car at the lone petrol



Pic: Anil Pimplapure

Survey site

papillosa and Black-headed Ibis *Threskiornis melanocephalus* in the cultivation, Indian Robin, Common Woodshrike *Tephrodornis pondicerianus*, Bay-backed Shrike *Lanius vittatus* on perches, Indian Roller *Coracias benghalensis*, Large Grey Babbler *Turdoides striatus*, House Swift *Apus affinis*, Asian Palm Swifts *Cypsiurus balasiensis*, Black Drongo *Dicrurus macrocercus*, Eurasian Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*, Jungle Crow *Corvus macrorhynchos* and Yellow-legged Buttonquail *Turnix tanki*. A tree of Toddy Palm had around 40 nests of Baya Weavers *Ploceus philippinus* in construction phase.

With the sweetest song among babblers, Yellow-billed Babbler (White-

pump in Sironcha. The journey was along the river Pranahita. We saw the riverbank and agriculture land which was completely overgrown by *Parthenium*.

Our guides were Mr. Narayan Bore, in his sixties and Mr. Tirupati Dhannore, 28. In the evening, we travelled back to Ankisa, 11 km west of Asaralli towards Sironcha. We expected this area to be the same area where the Jerdon's Courser was possibly heard the previous day. While going to Asaralli we spotted good scrub jungle. The evening was tense, as we did a 'transect' along an undisturbed patch of scrub jungle. Here also the lapwings were numerous. We saw a Jungle Owlet *Glaucidium radiatum* and heard calls

RESEARCH FOR CONSERVATION

of nightjars *Caprimulgus affinis*, *C. asiaticus* and *C. indicus* and spotted owlets. The evening saw a wave of frantic excitement when Raju declared that he had a Jerdon's Courser in sight. He didn't. We then played the call from 6 pm to 9 pm. We stayed for the evening at the Ankisa Forest Rest House.

Day-3 (11th June 2006):

At 5 am we started the survey along the road towards Kopela village. However after a kilometer the scrub jungle landscape changed to teak forest and then to evergreen forest of the Eastern Ghats. We continued the route via Bodla Nullah, Somanpalli and stopped at Kopela. Forester Mr. Jangamwar helped us meet the shy locals and discuss the birds. As the locals knew only Telugu, Mr. Tirupati came to our help as an interpreter. The calls of Jerdon's Courser did not elicit any response from the forest nor from the locals.

Not much bird activity was seen, till the village of Somanpalli. However, a few kilometers from Somanpalli there was a lot of bird activity as the forest was green and dense. Here we saw Yellow-footed Green Pigeon *Treron phoenicoptera*, White-breasted Kingfisher *Halcyon smyrnensis*, Spotted Dove *Streptopelia chinensis*, White-bellied Drongo *Dicrurus caerulescens*, Crested Serpent Eagle,

Indian Pitta *Pitta brachyuran*, Eurasian Golden Oriole *Oriolus oriolus*, Blue-tailed Bee-eater *Merops philippinus*, Eurasian Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus* and many common species. We again saw many Giant Squirrels and their nests.

Some general observations

1. Very few birds could be seen near villages.
2. Locals hunt using a battery operated horn (used for bikes), which produces a 'kirrrrr' sound, and a searchlight.
3. Two groups of boys were seen in Sironcha, hunting birds with a catapult.
4. Asian Palm Swifts *Cypsiurus balasiensis* are very common in villages.

Epilogue

Though the survey did not result in rediscovering the rare Jerdon's Courser in Maharashtra, we are sure some day it will be rediscovered here, because some villagers identified the birds positively. The forest department has strongly advised us not to go for a second expedition as the situation has worsened now, Hence we are holding back. We hope, whatever the problem, the Naxalites are not against wildlife and birds!

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Mr. B. Mujumdar, Principal Chief Conservator of Forests

(Maharashtra State) for helping us in executing the survey. Thanks to Dr. Asad Rahmani and Mr. Jeganathan for providing the call box of Jerdon's Courser. Thanks to Mr. Shaikh, RFO, Sironcha, Mr. Gahokar, RFO, Asaralli and Mr. Jangamwar, Forester, Kopela for making the stay comfortable and helping us everytime. Thanks to Mr. Ashish Bhopale for accompanying us during the trip. Thanks to Mr. Rafique for driving us safely. Thanks to the unknown well-wishers for taking care of our safety.

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Contact:

#Raju Kasambe, G-1, Laxmi Apartments, 64, Vidya Vihar Colony, Pratap Nagar, Nagpur-440022, Maharashtra
E-mail: kasambe.raju@gmail.com,
Phone: (0712-2241893)
*Q-12, Siddhivinayak Apartments, Laxmi Nagar, Nagpur-440022, Maharashtra.
**Honorary Wildlife Warden, 66, Ganesh Colony, Pratap Nagar, Nagpur-440022, Maharashtra.



Mr. Raju Kasambe playing the Jerdon's Courser Call from the BNHS "Call box" and showing the bird photograph to tribal

Pic: Anil Pimplepure

Of Pelicans and Power Plants

Anand Chandrasekhar, Advocacy Officer, IBA



Pic: Anand C. Sekhar

This annual Pelican spectacle could disappear due to unsustainable development models and poor environment decision-making

While we love all creatures great and small, there are certain ones we identify with more than others. These favoured few usually possess characters we cherish among our kind; strength, beauty, grace, fearlessness and so on. For me, pelicans are definitely one of them. They are like old, wise Samaritans from the skies. Their eyes seem to express the sort of intelligence usually reserved for human beings. It is as if they are higher life-forms, reincarnated as birds as a sort of spiritual penance. There is also an aura of 'ancientness' about them; as if they have seen a prehistoric world before our time and lived to tell the tale. Maybe that is why they are revered by villagers in India who believe that as long as the pelicans come, the world will continue to survive.

One such village is Telineelapuram on the east coast of Andhra Pradesh. It is a small hamlet that appears deceptively like many others that dot the countryside. Its Telugu-speaking inhabitants scrape a meagre living from the land and wear contented smiles that are the envy of jaded city-folk. Toothless old men and boisterous, half-naked children hold fort, while the able-bodied adults are hard at work in the paddy fields nearby-picture-postcard rural India. However, once every year this idyll calm is shattered by the wing beats of visiting pelicans that descend on the few tamarind trees in the village. This aerial invasion begins in August and continues until all of the 400 odd Spot-billed Pelicans have made Telineelapuram their winter residence. The tranquillity of the village becomes

a thing of the past as the pelicans jostle for prime perching and nesting positions. The limited numbers of tamarind trees are transformed into highly prized pelican real estate.

Despite the cacophony above, the villagers are actually quite pleased about the arrival of their feathered temporary neighbours. They believe that the arrival of the pelicans guarantees a good paddy harvest and consider the pelicans an auspicious omen. This could probably be attributed to the fact that their arrival coincides with the end of the south-west monsoon. The pelicans breed and nest here, and up to 130 nests have been counted in a single season. This annual spectacle has attracted many birders and conservationists. Besides Spot-billed Pelicans, around 600 Painted



Pic: Anand C. Sekhar

Illegal access road to the proposed East Coast Energy thermal power plant site in the middle of the Nowpada wetlands

Storks also nest on the *Acacia* trees in the village. Telineelapuram has become the poster child of Community Conserved Areas in India along the lines of Kokere Bellur in neighbouring Karnataka. The site has been designated as an Important Bird Area (IBA) by BirdLife International, through the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS), in recognition of its global importance for avifauna. Despite the site not being a Protected Area, the Andhra Pradesh Forest Department has purchased some land in the village and erected a rest house and a watch tower as a testimony to its importance.

However, all is not well in this pelican haven. Approximately 5 km from Telineelapuram, lies the Nowpada swamps, covering an area of 15-20 sq. km. These brackish swamps are rich in fish, crustaceans and other nutrients that are essential for the breeding and survival of the visiting pelicans and storks. A 2,640 MW Bhavanapadu Thermal Power Project promoted by East Coast Energy Private Ltd., is planned directly at the Nowpada swamps that the pelicans depend on for food. The company had begun the



Pic: Anand C. Sekhar

The support of local communities is crucial especially in IBAs outside the Protected Area Network

excavating and filling up of the Nowpada swamps since July 2008, prior to receiving the mandatory environment clearance from the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF). The actual construction of the thermal power plant has also begun in earnest and an access road has been built for passage of heavy trucks carrying construction material. The company is also guilty of diverting fresh water flowing from surrounding areas away from the swamp to facilitate drainage of construction site. In order to achieve this, they have constructed a canal to ensure that fresh

water bypasses the swamp and directly enters the creek. Reduced flow of the fresh water interferes with the hydrological regime and increases salinity, thereby threatening the very ecological integrity of the swamp.

As expected, East Coast Energy has tried to brush the importance of the site under the proverbial Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) study carpet. The study period for the EIA was restricted to 3 months between March and May 2007 (i.e. the dry season). Three months is not an adequate period for the study of a complex ecosystem in



Pic: Anand C. Sekhar

Illegal power plant construction activity on the Nowpada wetlands is denying access to foraging Storks and Pelicans and is likely to affect their breeding success

the water regime that is dependent on seasonal changes. That is why most wetland surveys incorporate a dry season and wet season survey to ensure an accurate estimate of wetland biodiversity. The swamp is also at its smallest during the dry season, thereby providing an inaccurate representation of the project affected area. Most importantly, migratory birds arrive at the site from late August (early autumn) onwards every year. A survey in the summer excludes this crucial faunal biodiversity, thereby underestimating the impact of the project.

In addition, the Final EIA report commissioned by the company has several inaccuracies and omissions that could have a bearing on the clearance of the project by the Ministry of Environment and Forests. For example, the final EIA report states that “*There are no National Parks, Sanctuaries, Elephant/Tiger Reserves, migratory routes within 10 km of the project site*”. This is inaccurate. The site falls on an important migratory route for migratory birds from Siberia along

the Central Asian Flyway including our beloved Spot-billed Pelicans. In fact, an annexure in the same final EIA report lists the presence of migratory bird species such as Bar-headed Goose, Northern Shoveller, Spot-billed Pelican, Sarus Crane, Common Teal, Cotton Teal, Common Pochard, etc. in the ‘Study Area’. Hence the report is not only inaccurate but also self-contradictory.

Sadly, this is not an isolated instance of wanton destruction of wildlife habitats lacking official protection. Wetlands and other habitats all over India are under threat from a range of ‘development’ projects. The term ‘sustainable development’ sees wide circulation in seminars, company websites and project proposals but very little evidence on the ground. Many questions beg to be asked and answered. Why is India so keen on thermal power despite it being the ‘dirtiest’ way to generate energy in a world affected by climate change? Why do we not have a national policy on wetlands despite the dependence of

millions of Indians on them for survival, livelihood and ecosystem services? Why has our sensitive coastline been earmarked for industrial development? Why are environment and wildlife not important issues during election time?

It is far too easy to blame others for what is happening, to leave it to the ‘experts’, to admit defeat and remain armchair conservationists. By doing so we are turning our backs on our role as custodians of our natural heritage. The conservation of our wildlife is too big a task to be left to the Government, NGOs, national laws and international conventions. In my limited experience, it is always the passionate individual who takes on powerful vested interests that makes a difference. Never underestimate the power of one. Our pelicans are depending on it.

Contact

Advocacy Officer, Important Bird Areas (IBA) programme
Bombay Natural History Society
Hornbill House, Mumbai -400 001
Email: advocacy.officer_iba@yahoo.co.in

ENVIS (Environmental Information System): A gateway to extract information on Environment

Sujit Narwade, Scientist-In-Charge, ENVIS Centre, BNHS and Asad R. Rahmani, Director, BNHS

On 15th September BNHS completed 125 years. BNHS is in the process of strengthening the existing database and facilitate access to information to all who are working towards conserving biodiversity of this region. This database will be made available through a network of ENVIS Centres. The Environmental Information System (ENVIS) in the country was established by the Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of India which has at present a network of 85 Centers on various subject areas and a focal point in the Ministry. ENVIS due to its comprehensive network has been designed as the National Focal Point (NFP) for a global environmental information network of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). In order to strengthen the information activities of the NFP, ENVIS was designated as the Regional Service Centre (RSC) of INFOTERRA of UNEP in 1985 for the South Asia Sub-Region countries. INFOTERRA is the global environmental information exchange network of the United Nations Environment Programme. The network operates through a system of government-designated national focal points which at present number 177. An INFOTERRA national focal point is essentially a national environmental information centre usually located in the ministry or agency responsible for environmental protection. The primary function of each centre is to provide a national environmental information service. Any one can get any kind of authentic scientific information through the powerful ENVIS network. In case of difficulty, one can just send a query to the ENVIS Centre which will be attended to on priority.

ENVIS Centre at BNHS

In the fitness of things, the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) was selected as an ENVIS (Environmental Information System) Centre by the Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of India during the year of the Sálim Ali Birth Centenary celebrations, in 1996. It was inaugurated by Shri. N.R. Krishnan, Secretary, Ministry of Environment and Forests on 18.6.1996.

The ENVIS Centre at BNHS deals with

information on 'Avian Ecology'. The selection of BNHS to have such a Centre is justified as it has been related with studies on ornithology, natural history and conservation. Another distinction is the publication of its scientific journal, the Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society (JBNHS) since 1886, which is referred by scientific community for studies on any aspect of the ecology of the subcontinent. Besides this, the Society has a large collection of books, scientific journals and bird skins, some

of which are more than a century old and available nowhere else.

Here I want to share my experience with all of you. Before initiation of the research on any bird there is need to search the earlier references. During my work I found that the detailed and continuous study of many birds is not carried out in Indian region. Reports and papers are available for only some of the endangered birds and usually common birds get neglected by the scientists.



Pic: Sujit Narwade

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*: The most common but least studied bird

Objectives of the ENVIS Centre at BNHS

The primary objective of all ENVIS Centers is to collect, collate, store and disseminate environmental information to various user groups, including policy planners, decision makers, researchers and the layman. As mentioned earlier, the Centre at the BNHS has been assigned the responsibility of being the focal point for information on 'Avian Ecology'. The plans envisaged for the ENVIS Centre at BNHS include long-term

MONITORING AND INTERVENTION



Pic: Nikhil Bhopale

White-backed Vulture *Gyps bengalensis*: Once very common but now Critically Endangered

objectives like building up a repository and dissemination centre of avian ecology; gearing up the modern technologies of acquisition, processing, storage, retrieval and dissemination of information of birds as well as to support and promote research, development and innovation in ornithology.

Short-term objectives are to provide national environmental information service relevant to present needs and capable of development to meet the future needs of the users, originators, processors and disseminators of information; to build up storage, retrieval and dissemination capabilities with the ultimate objectives of disseminating information speedily to the users; to promote, national and international cooperation and liaison for exchange of environment related information; to promote, support and assist education and personnel training programmes designed to enhance environmental information processing and utilization capabilities and to promote exchange of information amongst developing countries.

Responsibilities assigned to ENVIS Centre are to establish linkages with all information sources on Ornithology; responding to user queries; establishment of a data bank on some selected parameters relating to birds;

coordination with the Focal Point for supplying relevant, adequate and timely information to the users; helping the Focal Point in gradually making an inventory of information material available at the Centre and identification of information gaps in avian ecology and action to fill these gaps.

BUCEROS

Buceros, to those unfamiliar, is the genus under which the Great Hornbill (Great Indian Pied Hornbill) is classified. The Great Hornbill is the logo of the BNHS. The Society already has a popular publication, HORNBILL named after its mascot. To avoid duplication of the name for two publications from same organization, it was decided to use the generic name, Buceros for the Newsletter as its output will be mainly of a scientific nature. Earlier we used to publish a monograph or a kind of bulletin on a specific issue as mentioned above. For example the special issues on the International South Asian Vulture Recovery Plan Workshop, Threatened Birds of India, Endemic Birds of India, Standardized Common and Scientific names of the Birds of the Indian Subcontinent have become very popular. From 2007 we changed the format of Buceros, which now includes

content on National News, International News, one or two articles and abstracts of recently published literature on Avian Ecology. Some of the prominent aspects are as follows:

About

www.bnhsenvnis.nic.in website

Users can search the information through different **databases** focussing on avian ecology. Databases include bibliography, abstracts, Endemic Birds of India, threatened birds of India, Ramsar sites, Important Bird Areas (IBAs) etc. There is facility to search through different fields like Author, Year, Title and Journals, etc. **Abstract** service has been launched recently and provides abstracts of research papers on avian ecology. Right now very few abstracts are available online and our team is working on this database. Basic information like establishment and **objectives** of ENVIS Centre is provided on 'About ENVIS' page. The list and contact details of the other **ENVIS Centres** on various subject areas facilitate users to navigate in different subject areas of environmental studies. The detailed information about **BNHS**, our parent organisation and its functioning has been provided. Link to the **other websites** and **Journals** devoted to the Avian Ecology are available. Work on "Kid's Corner" aimed towards school-going children is under progress. All issues of **Buceros**, **BNHS-ENVIS** publication are available in PDF format. **Query** form can be used to ask the queries and to send the feedback.

Request for users

To strengthen the databases I would like to request all readers to send the literature which is not available in databases of BNHS-ENVIS Centre. For this you just need to search through the databases on our website and inform us. Those who want to contribute in form of articles and photographs related to the avian ecology, are always welcome.

Uran wetlands: Yet another winter destination for water birds



Pic: Vidyadhar Atkore

Uran Wetland — a potential IBA

**Vidyadhar Atkore,
Project officer, IBA
BNHS, Mumbai**

For me, exploring wilderness sites has now become a way of life, and to see winged friends I decided to visit Uran. Uran, a potential Ramsar site, is a small village east of Mumbai across Thane creek in the Raigad district of Maharashtra state. Uran, the name is derived from the Goddess Uranavati. The 2001 human census suggests that Uran has a population of 23,254 with 79 % literacy rate, indeed much higher than the national average (59.5%). Ancient history shows Uran was ruled by the Mauryas, Chalukyas, Yadavas, Portugese, Marathas and British. Today, it is a part of Navi Mumbai City. Over the years the face of the village changed from a small fishing village to a special economic zone. Now, many industries have established their roots here such as the Jawaharlal Nehru Port Trust (JNPT), Maharashtra State Electricity Board (MSEB) and Oil and Natural Gas Company

(ONGC). But the outskirts of the town are still rural. Besides paddy farming, people depend on city life of Mumbai for employment. By train, Uran is 30 to 45 minutes away from Mumbai city. Many people live in Uran and daily commute to Mumbai.

Besides Uran, Thane creek, Elephanta Islands, and the Mahul-Sewri mudflats are some of the crucial contiguous habitats for the water birds on the eastern coast of Mumbai. Thane Creek and Sewri are already IBA sites (Islam and Rahmani, 2004) and receive many water birds. Over 205 species of birds have been reported from Thane Creek alone (Nitsure, 2002), whereas the Mahul-Sewri swamp receives thousands of flamingos during winter every year. But, the Elephanta Islands and Uran swamps, situated south of the Thane creek, seem to have been left out while identifying potential IBA sites. According to recent reports, Uran attracts flamingos, spoonbills and many other water birds. I recommend extending the boundaries of Sewri and Thane creeks to include the Elephanta Islands and Uran.

Nikhil Bhopale, my colleague and birdwatcher told me that Uran is dotted with small water bodies



Pic: Vidyadhar Atkore

Industrial development around Uran Wetland

and is an important birding site too. So both of us, with our birding buddy Priyanka Iyer, visited Uran on 2nd October, 2008.

It was my first birding trip, since I joined the Bombay Natural History Society. Most of my earlier visits were to forested areas in hilly terrains of the Himalayas. I always craved to see water birds, especially spoonbills and flamingos. On a beautiful sunny day when we reached Uran at about 08.30 am, a bit late for birdwatching, birds were still active, feeding in the mudflats and shallow waters, enroute to their final wintering destinations further south. The wetlands were dotted with Western Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*, Little Cormorant *Phalacrocorax niger* and some Black-winged Silt *Himantopus himantopus*. Intermediate Egret *Egretta intermedia*, Indian Pond Heron *Ardeola grayii*, Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*, Common Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis* and bush dwelling birds such as Asian Koel *Eudynamis scolopcea*, Bay-backed Shrike *Lanius vittatus* and Plain Prinia *Prinia inornata*. But still I was not satisfied. I wanted to see the star attraction, the Lesser Flamingo *Phoeniconaias minor*.

Within no time we witnessed a flock of 10 Painted Storks flying by. We were all thrilled by the sighting. Eventually we saw many flocks of waders flying across and arriving hurriedly in nearby wetlands. There were Intermediate Egret, Asian Openbill *Anastomus oscitans*, Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*, Western Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa* and Pied Avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta*. Beside this, we also saw two Western Marsh Harriers *Circus aeruginosus*. Their soaring flight had disturbed

some of the waders (Black-tailed Godwits, sandpipers and plovers). After some time we came to a salt pan where Nikhil sighted a Western Reef Heron *Egretta gularis*, standing quietly amidst few Grey Herons and Cattle Egrets. First I mistook it to be a fledgling of Grey Heron. I was unable to contain my excitement because of the clear sighting of Western Marsh Harrier and Western Reef Heron, which were new species of birds to be added to my checklist, though Flamingos were yet to be seen. For them the weather was hot and winter had not yet set in. We decided to visit Uran again to see Flamingos.

So far we had enjoyed the birding. But found their habitat was no longer safe. This potential IBA is not free from increasing environmental problems. Almost the whole eastern coastline along the Mumbai industrial area is under tremendous pressure due to industrialization, dumping of solid waste in the creek, seepage of organic and inorganic waste, oil spills and siltation. The water is highly contaminated with oil and grease due to proximity to two ports. The slums nearby are dependent on mangrove for fuel wood. Some of the hills beside the road were being heavily excavated. Many houses are being constructed and many more planned. This is the fate of the hills. But what about the empty lands, those too are being used for construction?

Contact:

Bombay Natural History Society
Hornbill House, Mumbai 400 001

Email: vidyadhar.atkore@gmail.com

Demoiselle Crane sighted in Koonthakulam: An IBA

Chinna Sathan and Bal Pandi

Mr. Bal Pandi, the official bird watcher of Koonthakulam, Tirunelveli district, Tamil Nadu told me about a rare sighting of lonely Demoiselle crane in Koonthakulam during 2006. It is hard to believe; because such cranes are winter visitors to south-east Europe and north India and they are not sighted in Tamil Nadu. On rare occasions, some birds may visit Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. These birds come in flocks and not as single individual.

During the migration season of 2007-08, birds such as Northern Pintail, Garganey, Sandpipers, Bar-headed Goose, Pale Harrier, and Flamingo started to come Koonthakulam in flocks. Bal Pandi tipped me off about the arrival of a Demoiselle Crane again, in October. I visited Koonthakulam on 23, 24, 25 Dec-2007 accompanied by one of my friends and a wildlife photographer, Mr. N. Radhakrishnan, who owns a studio in Coimbatore.

On 23rd we launched a search for the Demoiselle Crane in Koonthakulam, Karunkulam, Silayam and Kadankulam. These cranes prefer marshes, grassy plains and lakes. So with binoculars we went to lakes and systematically did the search. We also went to Vijayanarayanam, one of the big lakes in Tamil nadu. The lake was fully dried up because the north-east monsoon had not brought rain in the region and also the water was not released from Manimuthar dam. Therefore the lake had become a grassland.

We walked inside the grassy meadows of the lake. We were able to see flocks of aquatic birds such as Spot-billed

Pelican, Bar-headed Goose, Spoonbill, White Ibis and Painted Stork on a small portion of swampy water. At the sound of our foot steps, flocks of Little Ringed Plovers abandoned their feeding on green meadows with an alarm and flew off in a large group as a very big sheet of carpet and twisting directions in uniformed manner. This was how Dr. Salim Ali had narrated and recorded this enjoyable moment in 'The Book of Indian Birds', the book says, '*Though scattered when feeding, the party flies off together on alarm, uttering a short plaintive whistling 'phiu', twisting and wheeling the air in unison*'. We also saw Pale Harrier, Kestrel, Brahmini Kite, and Marsh Harrier. All birds were enjoying the swampy vast grassland inside the dried up lake.

Bal Pandi with his Pentax binocular at last spotted the lonely Demoiselle Crane along with Spott-billed Pelican flocks at 3.30 pm. They were all taking rest at the farthest western side of the lake. Bal Pandi had noticed Demoiselle Crane in this region for the past two seasons. On our request, Mr. N. Radhakrishnan snapped several pictures of the Crane in kneeling posture and in flight.

On 26.1.2008 Republic Day, Bal Pandi spotted one more Demoiselle Crane in the lake of Vijayanarayanam, along with the Crane already spotted.

Contact: sukubird@yahoo.com



Sighting of Demoiselle crane is rare in Koonthakulam

The Nature Trust

Founded in : January 14, 2003
 Contact Person : Mr. K.V.R.K Thirunaranan
 Managing Trustee,
 D-1, Saibaba Colony
 No.1 Kannagi St., East Tambaram
 Chennai - 600059, Tamilnadu
 Telephone Number : 09444477358
 Email Address : thenaturetrust@gmail.com



Objective

- To conserve nature and natural resources
- Creating awareness to protect flora and fauna, to maintain proper ecological balance
- To work on environmental education for corporation and schools
- To study the ecology of Indian Great Horned Owl in Nanmagalam Reserve Forest
- To study the ecology of Indian Gaur in Upper Palani Hills (Mannavanur, Keelanavayal and Kookal).
- Studying the behaviour pattern of Indian Gaur in captive breeding at Arinagar Anna Zoological Park, Vandallur
- Create awareness to conserve the urban wetlands
- Studying the migrant birds in and around Chennai.
- Mitigating Man-Gaur conflict in Keelanavayal village through creating awareness among farmers for not planting mono culture plantations in adjacent patta lands and the fringes of the forest

Operational Area

In Upper Palani Hills: Mannavanur, Kookal and Keelanavayal villages in Kodaikanal taluk of Dindugal district. (Reserve forest covering Mannavanur and Poombarai ranges).

In Chennai: Vedathangal and Karikilli Bird Sanctuary, Aringar Anna Zoological Park, Urban Wetlands and Nanmangalam Reserve Forest.

Major Activities

- Imparting conservation education, particularly in the field of bird conservation, to young naturalists.
- Organizing school trips to Madavaram and Manali jheels to understand the need of conservation
- Nature walks conducted for school children to study the habitat of Indian Great Horned Owl
- As a part of Wildlife Week celebrations, wildlife films like the Nagarhole Wildlife Sanctuary and Point Calimere Bird Sanctuary by Shekar Dattari, to be screened for students and locals.



Spread of nature awareness through pamphlet



Bird-watching and monitoring activity



Wildlife exhibition conducted for school students



Spreading knowledge of fauna and avifauna

- A trip to school children and other bird watchers to Vedathangal and Karkilli Bird Sanctuary to celebrate World Wetlands Day in February
- Regular visit to Pulicat and Nellapattu Bird Sanctuary, an IBA and Ramsar site

- A study on flamingo and its habitat is being done at Pulicat Lake
- Visit to Parambikulam Wildlife Sanctuary to study the habitat of Indian Gaur and wildlife conservation
- Regular reporting to the media on conservation related issues, so as to deliver the message to the masses
- The Trust members participated in Chennai Bird Race at Kalivali Wetland held in the month of February 2008. They identified 34 species of wetland birds.

Future plans

- To build community support for biodiversity, nature and forest conservation
- To involve locals, government officials, colleges and schools in greater number for protection of the IBA sites
- To monitor more IBA sites like Pulicat and Nellapattu Bird Sanctuary
- Create awareness to protect Urban wetland and its habitat
- Study migratory birds in and around Chennai

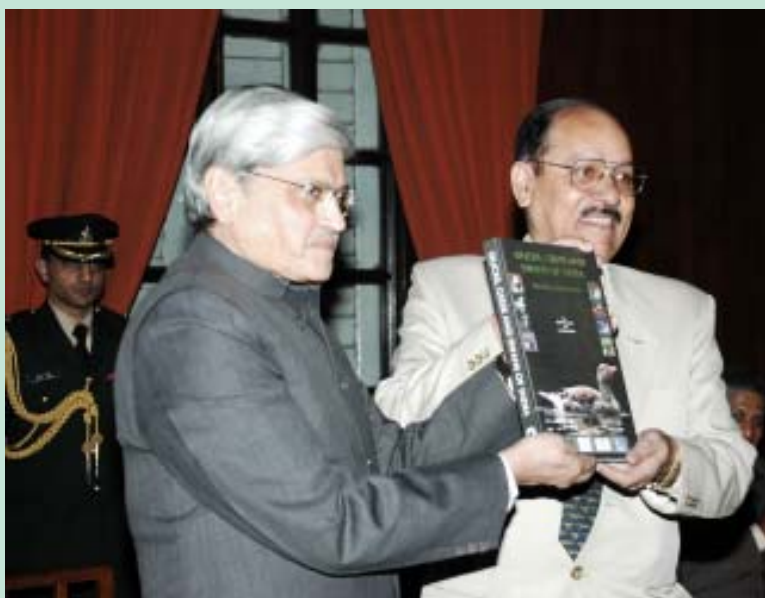
Release of the book - Ducks, Geese and Swans of India

BNHS has been responsible for many of the first natural history publications in India. Many books still continue to be the primary reference source for amateurs and professionals. Keeping with this tradition, BNHS has added one more feather to its cap by releasing the book. "Ducks, Geese and Swans of India" authored by Dr. Asad Rahmani and Mr. Zafar-ul-Islam. The Governor of West Bengal, Shri Gopalkrishna Gandhi released the book at Raj Bhavan, Kolkata on Saturday, 3rd January 2009.

The book covers 42 species of ducks, geese and swans found in India. Here the distribution and migratory movements of these birds are given. Thus making it all the more important in the light of spread of avian flu in India as well as other countries. Distribution and Ringing Maps are provided on the companion CD. All species are illustrated in colour. The Book will be a valuable reference for ornithologists, birdwatchers, forest officials, veterinary professionals and even for a beginner.

The production of the book is supported by the Ministry of Environment and Forests, Govt. of India and the major

sponsors are IBCN, BNHS, BirdLife International and Royal Society for Protection of Birds (RSPB). The book is published by IBCN, BNHS and Oxford University Press. The book is priced at Rs.1,300/- and BNHS members will get a 25% discount.



Pic: Noor I. Khan

The Hon'ble Governor Shri Gopalkrishna Gandhi (left) releasing the book

IBA Day Celebration at Telineelapuram

K. Mrutyumjaya Rao, IBCN member



Mandal Education Officer, Rajagopala Rao presiding the meeting

The IBA day celebration was held on 1st December 2008 in Telineelapuram. Four high schools from villages around Telineelapuram participated in this programme.

1. Government Boys High School, Tekkali
2. Government Girls High School, Tekkali
3. Z.P. High School, Naupada R.S.
4. Z.P. High School Ravivalasa.

Sri. S.D. Rama Rao, DFO, Srikakulam was the chief guest and Sri Raja Gopal, Mandal Education Officer presided the meeting. A lecture about IBA and about Telineelapuram was given. There was a essay writing competition held in the regional language, Telugu. The topic was 'The role of birds in environment and our responsibility to conserve them'.

Nearly 100 students participated in this competition. Some students even gave speeches on bird conservation and on Telineelapuram Birds. Prizes were given to winners from respective schools. Participation certificate was given to every participant to encourage them in bird life and their protection.

The head masters and teachers felt very happy with the event and said such type of awareness programmes on habitat and bird conservation enlighten them and make them responsible towards nature and the IBA site.

Contact: Block 'A', Flat no. 101, L.V. Street,
Surya Rao Peta, Kakinada - 533001, Andhra Pradesh



Prizes and certificates being given to the students

IBA Day celebration at Moreh, Manipur

R. K. Ranjan Singh,
IBCN State Coordinator, Manipur

IBA Day was observed behind schedule due to law and order problem and the previous district venue was changed due to the recent bomb blast. The Day was to be observed at Ukhrul District, but due to the bomb blast and frequent bandhs the site was shifted to Moreh of Chandel District.

Moreh is a border town with Myanmar which is 109 kilometers from the capital Imphal. Moreh is home to Yangoupokpi Lokchao Wildlife Sanctuary which is an IBA site. The significance of this sanctuary is that it is the international migratory route of threatened bird species. It was declared as a sanctuary on 21st March 1989. The area of the sanctuary is 184.80 sq. km. It has Teak-Gurjan and Tropical Moist Deciduous Forest type. It is the home to India's only ape species Hoolock Gibbon. It is also a home of Himalayan Black Bear and Burmese Green Peafowl. Elephants, migrate from Myanmar to this Sanctuary.

We reached Moreh on the 8th of November 2008. Our first spot was Moreh College and then proceeded to Moreh Trade Centre, where our programme was to be conducted. The programme started



at 4 pm. The participants were from the security forces, college lecturers, medical staff and locals. The programme began with the reason behind conducting Important Bird Areas Day and why Moreh was selected as the spot for the programme. I highlighted the importance of Yangoupokpi Wildlife Sanctuary and about the IBA programme.

Thokchaom Shyamsunder, Assistant Commandant 7th Manipur Rifles, was the Chief Guest of the function.

Wahengbam Rajes, Wildlife activist highlighted the importance of IBA and the species present in Yangoupokpi

Wildlife Sanctuary. He emphasized how the role of locals is important in conservation and in safeguarding the IBA.

Shyamji, Lecturer, Department of Botany, Moreh College highlighted the importance of flora and fauna of the state and its rich biodiversity. He also focused on the importance of wetlands and its disappearance, causing imbalance in the ecosystem of the state.

In his Presidential speech, Director of Food Processing Government of Manipur, Okram Muhindro felt that the time has come to conserve wildlife. The people of the state and of Moreh, should play a major role in conserving the wild habitat.

Ending the programme Dr. Ranjan sought the help of the locals, and forest officials in checking the sale of wild animals.

Poster campaign was organised at Moreh College. The programme was quite successful in the sense that the audiences were security forces from different background. It can be said that this is the first time such audience were present in any wildlife programme conducted here.

Contact: ranjanrk@sancharnet.in

Prashant Mahajan was a part of the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) for fifteen years. He recently joined The Earth Watch Institute, UK where he will pursue his PhD on Climate Change in collaboration with the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, India.

From 1993 to 1996 he worked as a Senior Education Officer on a 'Conservation Education Project' of BNHS at Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary, Tamil Nadu. During his tenure he sought local people's support for biodiversity conservation. Later from

1996 to 2006, he served as Centre Manager, at 'Conservation Education Centre' (CEC), at Goregaon Mumbai. He played a key role in strategic planning, implementation and monitoring various sustainable development projects with teachers and students, general public, corporates, forest departments and NGOs.

From 2006 to January 2009 he worked as an Asst. Director of BNHS, headed Important Bird Area Programme (IBA) of the BNHS. His main task was strategic planning, monitoring, fund raising, communica-



tion and project administration. Simultaneously he was also looking after the Conservation Education Centre at Delhi.

We wish him success in his new job.

IBA signage inauguration

Nawabganj WLS, an IBA, attained the status of being the first officially declared Important Bird Area (IBA) in the state. Mr. Atul Kumar Gupta IAS, Chief Secretary, State of Uttar Pradesh inaugurated the IBA Signage at the premises of NWLS. On this occasion Mr. Gupta inspected the beautification and restoration work done by district administration and state forest department. This water body was in shambles for the last two years due to lack of water and poor upkeep. But with determined efforts by District Administration and State Forest Department NWLS is a changed place now. The water body is replenished with water drawn from Morawan canal as an alternative source next to rain water. A 1,600 meter pathway and two telescope are also added to this new look IBA. At this occasion, Mr. Neeraj Srivastav, State Coordinator mentioned the need and importance of an IBA (an area of high conservation importance) in the conservation of birds and their habitat in the state.



Inaugurating IBA signage at Nawabganj Wildlife Sanctuary, Uttar Pradesh, December 7, 2008

Also present on the occasion were Mr. R. K. Mittal IAS, Principal Secretary (Social Welfare), Mr. J.N. Chamber IAS, Principal Secretary to Chief Minister, Mr. D.N.S. Suman Principal Chief Conservator of Forest, U.P. and other senior officers of District administration and Forest Department.

Clean-up at Pitti Bird Sanctuary, an IBA

Lakshadweep Marine Research and Conservation Centre (LMRCC) organized a clean-up at Pitti Bird Sanctuary on 26th February 2009. Pitti is the only oceanic tern nesting sanctuary of India and the only Important Bird Area (IBA) identified in Lakshadweep. This is the first time a cleaning activity has been organized in Pitti. The organization undertook a survey in Pitti Bird Sanctuary on October, 2008 to investigate the mass death of Sooty Terns. The present activity is the continuation of ongoing monitoring program in Pitti. The monitoring-cum-cleaning programme was organized with the permission of Environment and Forest Department, Lakshadweep. The team collected plastic bottles, footwears, fishing floats, glass bottles, tube lights etc from the islet and sea-shore. The plastic wastes reduce the natural beauty of the island and are harmful for nesting birds and chicks.

The organization is planning to



Photo courtesy: Idrees Babu

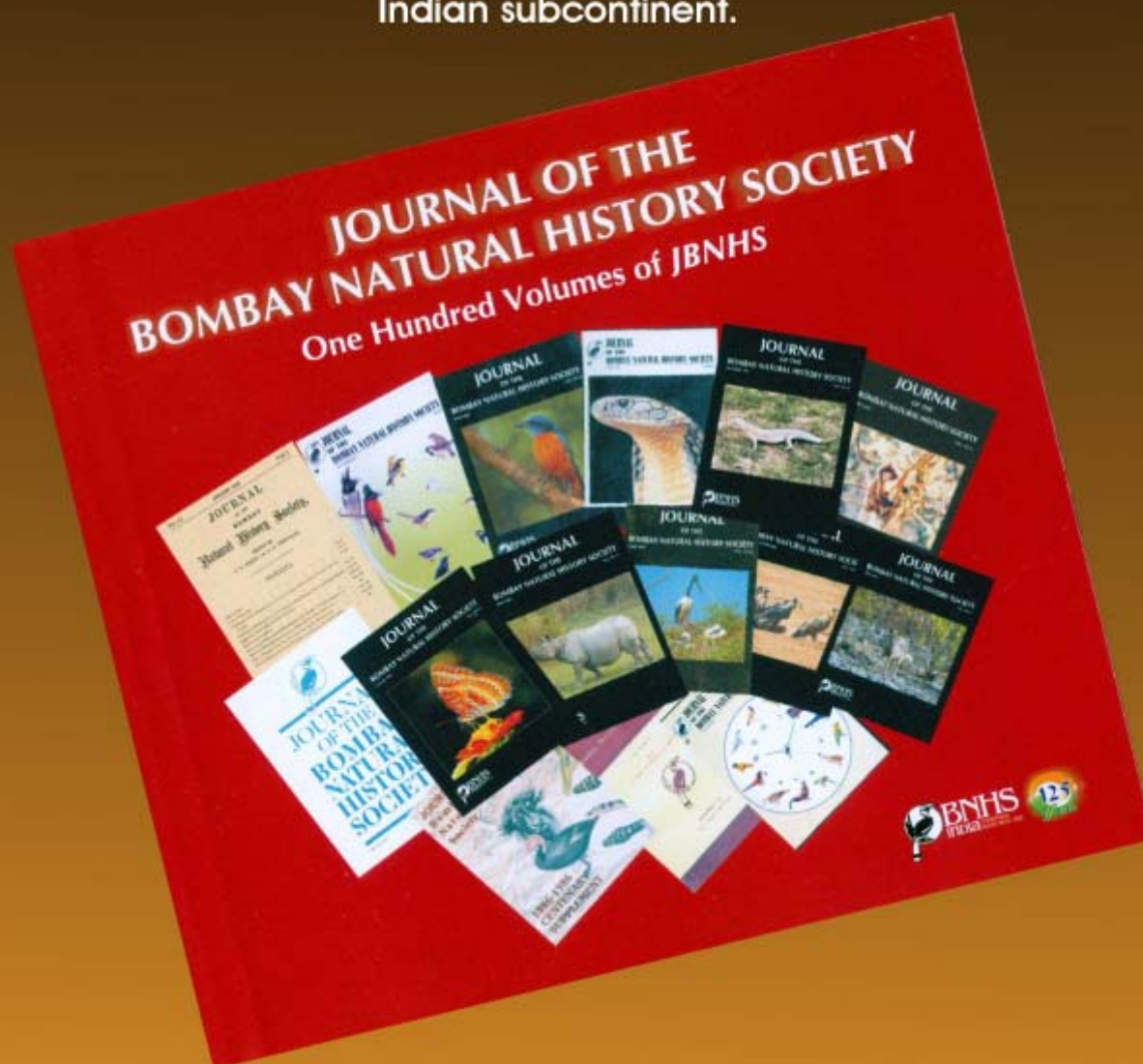
Left to right: Ameer, Idrees, salem, Thouseef, Hisham and Zaheer

organize similar activities in future with the participation of youth and students, explained Mr. Ameer M.C, Director, Beach Programs in a press release. LMRCC is a youth led initiative, which has the distinction of being

the first local organization formed for Marine Research and Conservation. LMRCC is the organizational member in the Indian Bird Conservation Network (IBCN).

100 Volumes of JBNHS in a DVD

The JBNHS was first published in 1886; it completed 100 volumes in 2003. Recognised as the premier scientific peer-reviewed journal on natural history it is an authority and a seminal database for information on the biodiversity of the Indian subcontinent.



This DVD is priced at Rs. 1,000/-.
(Packing and forwarding Rs. 50/- extra).
Please get one before the stock is exhausted.

Contact Mr. Santosh Mhapsekar on phone: (022) 22821811

OBITUARY



Dr. Ravi Sankaran

04-10-1963 to 17-01-2009

**Director, Sálim Ali Center for Ornithology and
Natural History (SACON)**

It is with deep sadness we report the death of Dr. Ravi Sankaran, one of the finest field biologists of India. Ravi started his career with BNHS in 1985 by working in the Florican Project with Dr. Asad Rahmani. They did extensive surveys in Gujarat, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Assam and other states. Later, Ravi submitted Ph.D. on the ecology of Lesser and Bengal floricans.

In 1992, Ravi joined the newly-established Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History (SACON) at Coimbatore. He worked extensively on the birds of Andaman and Nicobar Islands. However, he kept his interest on the Lesser Florican alive and whenever he used to get time he would go to the Lesser Florican areas during the monsoon. His studies on the Narcondam Hornbill is a master-piece of ecological and conservation work, which unfortunately was never published properly. His work on the Edible-nest Swiftlet in Andaman is a good example of ecological science and community conservation.

In recent years he was working in Nagaland with communities for the protection of biodiversity. Less than a year ago Ravi was selected as Director of the prestigious Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History. Within a short span of time he made remarkable changes. Ravi was deeply involved in the BNHS and IBCN and helped in identification of IBAs in Andaman and Nicobar. With his untimely passing away the IBCN has lost a great supporter, and India has lost a very talented conservationist.

IBCN STATE COORDINATORS

IBCN MISSION STATEMENT

To promote conservation of birds and their habitats through the development of a national network of individuals, organisations and the government

1. **Arunachal Pradesh**
Dr. Bharat Bhushan Bhatt
State Forest Research Institute, Van-Vihar
P.B.No. 159, Itanagar - 791 111
Email: b_bhatt@rediffmail.com
2. **Andhra Pradesh**
Mr. M. Shafaat Ulla
H.No. 4, St. No. 1, Avenue 8 (Rd No.3)
Banjara Hills, Andhra Pradesh 500 003
Email: shafaat_ulla@yahoo.co.in
3. **Assam**
Dr. Anwaruddin Choudhury
Near Gate No.1 of Nehru Stadium, Islampur Road Guwahati
781 007, Email: badru1@sify.com
4. **Bihar and Jharkhand**
Mr. Arvind Mishra
Mandar Nature Club
Anand Chikitsalaya Road, Bhagalpur - 812 002, Bihar.
Email: mncarvind@hotmail.com, mncarvind@rediffmail.com
5. **Chhattisgarh**
Mr. Arun M. K. Bharos
B-101 Gayatrinagar, PO Shankar Nagar, Raipur-492 007
Email: cwsraipur@yahoo.co.in, cwsraipur@hotmail.com
6. **Delhi**
Mr. Nikhil Devasar
Delhi Bird Club, C 1/503 Mayfair Tower, Charmwood Village,
Eros Garden, Surajkund Rd., Faridabad, Haryana.
Email: devasar@gmail.com
7. **Goa**
Mr. Carl D'Silva
'Masabille', Plt.6, Kamat Palm Grove Estate, Cardoz Vaddo
P.O. Caranzalem, Taligao, Goa - 403002
Email: cbeedee@sancharnet.in
8. **Gujarat**
 1. Mr. Jugal Kishor Tiwari (Kutch)
Centre for Desert and Ocean,
Po. Moti-Virani, Taluka – Nakhrana, Kutch – 370 665
Email: cedoindia@yahoo.com
 2. Dr. Bharat Jethva (North Gujarat)
322/2, Sector - 7A, Gandhinagar, Gujarat - 382 007
Email: bharat.jethva@wi-sa.org
9. **Haryana and Punjab**
Mr. Suresh C. Sharma
Gokul Nagar, Rohtak Road, Sonipat - 131 001
Email: sureshcsharma@gmail.com, sureshsharma@rediffmail.com
10. **Himachal Pradesh**
Mr. Jan Willem den Besten
Kuldeep House, Mc Leod Ganj, Kangra - 176 219
Email: denbesten888@hotmail.com
11. **Jammu and Kashmir**
 1. Dr. Ashfaq Ahmed Zarri (Jammu)
Manager Biodiversity Project
Baba Ghulam Shah Badshah University
Rajouri, Jammu and Kashmir - 185 131
Email: ashfaq_az@rediffmail.com
 2. Dr. Khursheed Ahmed (Kashmir)
Panzmulla (Salia), Dist. Anantnag
Jammu & Kashmir - 192 129
Email: khursheed202@yahoo.com
 3. Mr. Pankaj Chandan (Ladhak)
Project Manager, WWF India Field Office, Hemis Complex,
Zangsti Road, Leh - 194101
Ladhak, Jammu & Kashmir
Email: PChandan@wwfindia.net, pankajchandan@gmail.com
12. **Karnataka**
Dr. S. Subramanya
PHT Scheme, J Block, GVKV Campus
University Of Agricultural Sciences,
Bangalore, Karnataka- 560 065
Email: Subbus@vsnl.com
13. **Kerala**
Dr. P. O. Nameer
Asst. Professor, College of Forestry
Kerala Agricultural University (KAU),
Thrissur 680 656
Email: nameer.ommer@gmail.com
14. **Maharashtra**
Mr. Bishwarup Raha
Hemant Vihar, 13, Savarkar Nagar
Off. Gangapur Road, Nashik-422005
Email: wolfajay@hotmail.com
15. **Manipur**
Dr. R. K. Ranjan Singh
Manipur Association for Science and Society (MASS)
Manipur Cultural Integrated Conference
Palace Compound, Imphal - 795 001
Email: ranjanrk@sancharnet.in
16. **Mizoram**
Mr. N. R. Pradhan
Asstt. Conservator of Forests
C/o. Chief Conservator of Forests, WL, Mizoram
Aizawl, Mizoram
Email: navrpmiz12@yahoo.com
17. **Nagaland**
Mr. Thomas Kent
Asstt. Director of Tourism
C/o. Directorate of Tourism, Kohima,
Nagaland - 797 001
Email: ktthomasreng@yahoo.co.in
18. **Orissa**
Mr. Biswajit Mohanty
Wildlife Society of Orissa
"Shantikunj", Link Road, Cuttack- 753 012
Email: kachhapa@gmail.com
19. **Pondicherry**
Dr. Priya Davidar
Salim Ali School of Ecology &
Environmental Sciences Pondicherry University,
Kalapet - 605 014
Email: davidarp@si.edu
20. **Rajasthan**
Mr. Manoj Kulshreshtha
Snehdeep, B-33, Sethi Colony,
Jaipur - 302 004
Email: wildbrook@gmail.com, snehdeep_jp1@sancharnet.in
21. **Sikkim**
Ms. Usha Ganguli-Lachungpa
Sr. Research Officer (WL), Government of Sikkim
Department of Forest, Environment & Wildlife
Deorali-737 102, Gangtok
Email: ulachungpa@gmail.com, ulachungpa2001@yahoo.com
22. **Tamil Nadu**
 1. Dr. V. Santharam
C/o Institute of Bird Studies & Natural History
Rishi Valley Education Centre
Chittoor – 517 352, Andhra Pradesh
Email: vsram2003@yahoo.co.in
 2. Mr. Kumaran Sathasivan
29, Jadamuni, Koil Street, Madurai
Tamil Nadu - 625 001
Email: k_sathasivam@yahoo.co.in
23. **Tripura**
Mr. Kamal Kanti Banik
Dishari, Ek No. Tila, Belonia,
South Tripura - 799155.
Email: dishari21@yahoo.co.in
24. **Uttar Pradesh (East and West)**
 1. Dr. Vijay Prakash Singh (Eastern UP)
Jaidev Nagar (Rajgarh)
Lakhimpur Kheri - 262 701
Email: tarai_eco@yahoo.com
 2. Mr. Neeraj Srivastav (Western UP)
Flat No.303, Plot no.26/10,
Kumar Enclave, Wazir Hasan Road
Lucknow - 226 001
Email: neervun@yahoo.co.in
25. **West Bengal**
Mr. Kushal Mookherjee, Secretary,
Prakriti Samsad, 65,
Golf Club Road
Kolkata-700 033
Email: kushalmookherjee7@gmail.com

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